



Australian Bureau of Statistics

1301.6 - Tasmanian Year Book, 1996

ARCHIVED ISSUE Released at 11:30 AM (CANBERRA TIME) 22/04/2004

Feature Article - Tasmanian craft and design

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As well as gaining Australian and international recognition for the quality of design and manufacture of their products, Tasmanian designers also benefited from the Craft Curators Program of the Australia Council, which has seen three part-time curators of craft employed by the Tasmanian Museum and Art Gallery. Tasmania was also the host for 'Interdesign '95' a significant international conference held annually, usually in Europe or America.

Tasmanian furniture designs were shown at the International Contemporary Furniture Fair (ICFF) in New York in May 1995. This was a preparatory visit for a larger exhibition to be held in 1996. The Tasmanian stand received continuous praise in New York for the quality of its presentation, the designs and pamphlet. Peter Costello's 'Snap Chair' created a lot of interest. Architects and interior designers indicated that they were keen to see Tasmanian products represented in 1996. Liaisons with staff at the ICFF were established, as were links with the wider design community. Four leading designs magazines and two newspapers have expressed interest in publicising Tasmanian design.

Tasmanian designers also featured at 'Interior Designex '95,' the largest interior design and decoration show in Australia, which was held at Darling Harbour in Sydney. The stand, organised by Tasmania-Development and Resources, showed a range of Tasmanian products including furniture, lighting and other domestic objects. Enthusiastic interest was shown in the Tasmanian stand, which was ideally placed, being directly in front of the entrance, and it was one of the highlights of the show. Designers shown were those represented by the Tasmanian Design Development Company, Witt Design and De Jong Furniture.

Locally, the Tasmanian Museum and Art Gallery, has employed three part-time craft curators with funding from the Australia Council's Craft Curators Program. This gives a significant boost to crafts people, designers and the wider community as it has provided the opportunity for craft to take its place in the Museum's agenda alongside other arts as a significant contributor to Tasmanian culture. Dolla Merrillees, Stuart Thorne and Sara Lindsay were appointed in May 1994.

They have separately and collectively organised several exhibitions of craft and design. 'Colonial Pastime to Contemporary Profession', a major exhibition, was jointly curated. This large multidisciplinary display was a significant show of women's work from the gallery's collection and gave its audience a chance to appreciate the depth and innovation in the women's art practice from colonial times to the present. The show presented works typically classified as fine art alongside design and craft. Other exhibitions included:

- 'Australian Ceramics from the Hood Collection and the Easterbrook Bequest', a show of domestic-scale Australian ceramics;
- 'Cups and Saucers', a small show of works from the collection that included designs by

some internationally recognised masters such as Walter Gropius and Robert Venturi;

- ‘The Meaning of Dress’, a contemporary textile installation supported with selections from the collection; and
- ‘Designers Inc.’, a presentation of objects illustrating the entrepreneurial initiative of studio-based designers who are manufacturing their own designs.

Perhaps the most significant single event within the State in 1995 was the ‘Interdesign ’95’ conference held in Launceston. This conference is one the most significant international conferences on design and is endorsed by the International Council of Societies of Industrial Design. Twenty-five delegates from overseas, many of whom have international reputations for their design expertise, met and exchanged ideas with local and other Australian designers and experts from various fields. The conference’s theme - Sustainable Development: The Design Imperatives - was particularly appropriate for Tasmania. The keynote speaker Tapio Peräinen, managing director of Design Forum Finland for twenty-five years, is a recognised design theorist and educator. The conference’s major sponsors included the Hydro-Electric Commission, the University of Tasmania and the Association for the Development of Design in Tasmania.

Another significant development for furniture makers in Tasmania was the formation and incorporation of the Furniture Designers Association Inc. early in 1995. This organisation encourages innovation in design and supports professional practice in furniture design.

The Association, which holds regular meetings and forums on topics such as marketing, forestry and design-related matters, is open to designers, manufacturers and, through associate membership, to other interested parties.

A significant and developing feature of Tasmanian design over the year has been the growth of designers who are manufacturing and marketing their own work. Significant among these are two Launceston-based designers Dan Whiting and Rex Heathcote who both featured in the ‘Designers Inc.’ exhibition. Whiting and Heathcote share a large workshop in the Coats Paton building in Launceston. They are typical of a maturity in the design and craft community, which has recognised Tasmania’s reputation for quality, and combined this with contemporary design and an astute use of native timbers to produce designs that are marketable.

This page last updated 8 December 2006

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